

# The Battle Of Rich Mountain July 11, 1861

By Robert B. Boehm

In the spring of 1861 Union forces under the command of Major-General George B. McClellan invaded western Virginia. Following the defeat on June 3 of the little Confederate force under Colonel George A. Porterfield at Philippi, the Northern troops occupied most of northwestern Virginia west of the Laurel Hill-Rich Mountain chain. However, the rather demoralized Southern soldiers, who had retreated all the way to Huttonsville, were reinforced and led northward once more under the promising young General Robert S. Garnett. The main road over Laurel Hill and that over Rich Mountain was occupied by the Confederates. Garnett hoped thus to contain the Union forces while threatening their control of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at the same time.

The Southern army was much smaller than McClellan's. Estimates vary, but it is probable that Garnett had little more than 5,000 troops of which less than 1,000 were stationed at Rich Mountain.<sup>1</sup> There a fortified position, called Camp Garnett, had been constructed and placed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John Pegram. The Union forces in the area may have numbered as high as 20,000.<sup>2</sup>

General McClellan arrived in western Virginia on June 20 and immediately made plans to drive the Confederates out of the passes. He intended ultimately to occupy Beverly after which he could move eastward toward Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley or southward to help General Jacob Cox in his attempts to clear Confederate forces out of the Kanawha Valley. Occupation of Beverly and the upper Tygart River Valley would also have posed a threat to the vital Virginia railroads to the southeast.

McClellan decided to make his advance in two columns. The smaller of the two was commanded by General Thomas Morris.

<sup>1</sup> Clement A. Evans, ed., *Confederate Military History* (1899), III, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob D. Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: 1913), I, 20.

It was to advance to Laurel Hill and occupy the attention of General Garnett, who had his headquarters there, while McClellan himself was to lead the stronger column against the Rich Mountain defenses. The advance toward Rich Mountain was made slowly. The Union troops occupied Buckhannon on July 2, Middle Fork Bridge on July 8, and finally Roaring Creek, at the foot of the mountain, on July 9. Next, the Northern commander had to find some way to drive the Confederate troops from their position and seize Beverly in the rear of General Garnett's position at Laurel Hill.

McClellan prepared to start his offensive movement by sending out a reconnoitering expedition. It consisted of the 4th and 9th Ohio regiments and Loomis' Cold Water, Michigan battery, all under the direction of Lieutenant Orlando Poe, McClellan's engineer officer. The reconnaissance took place on July 10, and resulted in the discovery that the Confederate works, although elementary in character, were strong enough to make a frontal attack difficult. In the course of the movement one man was killed and two wounded by Confederate picket fire.<sup>3</sup> Two prisoners were taken who reported that there were approximately 8,000 or 9,000 men before McClellan, with heavy artillery and otherwise well armed. Colonel John Beatty of the 3rd Ohio commented on the little expedition and the alleged information that it produced: "What surprises me is that General McClellan should know so little about the character of the country, the number of the enemy, and the extent of fortifications."<sup>4</sup> Poe had noticed in the course of his reconnaissance that a low ridge ran along the front of the Confederate lines from which it might be possible to enfilade the Confederate works. On the 11th, therefore, he led eight companies of the 3rd Ohio and the entire 4th to learn whether cannon might be placed on the ridge. He was under observation from the Confederate lines while doing so, but was not fired upon. He reported to McClellan that he had found a suitable artillery position and was ordered to build a road to the area. He began the work with men from the 4th Ohio and completed it in the evening. Twelve pieces of artillery were prepared to move up in the morning.

<sup>3</sup> War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: 1860-1901), C. I, Part I, 12.

<sup>4</sup> John Beatty, *Memories of a Volunteer, 1861-1862* (New York: 1948), 24.

In Camp Garnett, Colonel Pegram was thinking of attacking McClellan, greatly underestimating his strength. When he suggested this to General Garnett, however, he was restrained. Colonel J. M. Heck, second-in-command at Camp Garnett, felt that this underestimation on the part of Pegram caused Garnett to decide not to retreat, which he would certainly have done had he supposed the enemy opposing him to have been "even half as strong as he was."<sup>5</sup>

In McClellan's camp on the evening of the 10th, a fortunate occurrence aided the Union forces. A rugged, uncouth mountain boy, about 18 years old, appeared in camp. His name was Hart and his father kept a tavern on the crest of Rich Mountain. The boy was pro-Union in sentiment and when taken to General Rosecrans he insisted that it was possible for troops to march around the left flank of the Confederate position to the summit of the mountain and on to his father's place on the Staunton-Parkersburg Road in Pegram's rear. The boy had often hunted through the area and was quite willing to act as a guide should the general desire it. Rosecrans was impressed by young Hart and about 10 p. m. he took him to see General McClellan. There, after much discussion, he got McClellan's reluctant consent to be permitted to lead a flanking movement under Hart's guidance.<sup>6</sup> He was to take his brigade, the 8th and 10th Indiana and 19th Ohio, together with the 12th Indiana and Burdsal's cavalry, on the mission. Altogether the force numbered 1,917 men. The movement was to begin at daylight on July 11. The troops were ordered to parade in silence, under arms, without knapsacks, with one day's rations in their haversacks, and full canteens. By accident the assembly was sounded early in the morning in the camp of the 19th Ohio and lights put on in several tents. They were promptly ordered extinguished and the column was formed and marched out with young Hart leading the way to the south. A rain set in about 6 a. m. while Rosecrans' force was struggling through the pathless forest. It continued till about 11 a. m., at which time the column had reached the crest of Rich Mountain. The troops were allowed to lie down and rest while General Rosecrans examined the country.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Official Records*, II, 215.

<sup>6</sup> J. Warren Keifer, *The Battle of Rich Mountain and Some Incidents*, a paper read before the Ohio Commandery of the Loyal Legion, Dec. 6, 1911, 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Official Records*, II, 215.

Meanwhile Major Keifer of the 3rd Ohio, who was in charge of the pickets in front of the Union camp, was approached by an orderly from McClellan about 9 a. m. Under his belt he had a large envelope addressed to General Rosecrans. Keifer claimed later that it was an order to stop the flanking movement and retire until a better plan could be devised. In any event, the orderly was directed to overtake Rosecrans by a route to the Confederate right, whereas Rosecrans had marched to the Confederate left. Keifer tried to tell the orderly this and was haughtily informed that he was to be allowed to pass the pickets unmolested. Keifer warned him of the danger of going further on the main road, but he insisted on proceeding. In a short time a shot was heard and soon the orderly's horse came galloping back without his rider.<sup>9</sup> The orderly had been wounded and captured and his dispatch gave Pegram absolute word that a flanking movement was taking place. He had already been warned by General Garnett that a possible attack might be made on his position, but by his right flank where a cowpath gave the enemy an opportunity to swing round to the rear. Furthermore, he had been alerted by the sounds and light in the Union camp early in the morning. As a result he had sent a small force to the crest of Rich Mountain. The Rockbridge Guards of the 25th Virginia, and the Buckingham Institute Guards of the 20th Virginia had stationed themselves near Hart's House with orders to watch for a turning movement from the north. The captain in charge of the small force had decided for himself that the attack was more likely to come from the south and had sent out pickets in that direction.<sup>9</sup>

When the orderly was captured, Pegram decided to reinforce the little unit at Hart's House and accordingly sent Captain Julius DeLagnel with one gun, a company of cavalry, and two infantry companies to the summit.<sup>10</sup> This strengthened the force there to approximately 310 men.<sup>11</sup>

About 2 or 3 p. m. Rosecrans' column, with the 10th Indiana at its head, approached the road at Hart's House and struck the Confederate pickets who opened fire. The Union force advanced, pushing the pickets back. The discovery of the Confederate

<sup>9</sup> Keifer, *Rich Mountain*, 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Evans, *Confederate Military History*, III, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>11</sup> *Official Records*, II, 215.

troops very nearly cost young Hart his life. He had assured Rosecrans when they started out that there were no Confederate troops at the summit. When the Federal troops were fired upon, it was assumed that Hart was treacherously trying to lead them into ambush. However, he was able to convince the Union officers of his sincerity and was spared.<sup>12</sup>

Rosecrans' troops pushed through dense underbrush until just before they reached the road, when they emerged into fairly open forest land. At once they were received by musketry and cannon fire. The one six-pounder which the Confederates had at the pass was commanded by Lieutenant Charles Statham who had the gun swung around to face south at the first fire of the pickets. The few companies of infantry were partly protected by a hastily constructed log breastwork on the north side of the road.<sup>13</sup> The first few rounds of the six-pounder were spherical shells, well aimed. Under the artillery and musket fire the Federal troops were forced to retire. Rosecrans then got three regiments in line with skirmishers out, and in about 20 minutes the fight was renewed. Statham had moved his gun a little higher on the slope north of the road and again opened on the advancing Federals. After considerable rapid firing, the Union troops retreated. The Confederate soldiers, thinking they had won final victory, gave loud shouts.<sup>14</sup> However, the battle was far from over. General Rosecrans extended his lines with part of one or two regiments in column ready to deliver a final charge whenever the fire of the rest of the troops in line should have sufficiently weakened the enemy.<sup>15</sup> Thus the Federals advanced slowly for a time, while pouring a severe fire on the Confederate line.

The Southerners suffered greatly. The artillery horses were hard hit and those attached to the caisson bolted at the height of the fight, heading down the mountain toward Camp Garnett. That left the gun with only the small amount of ammunition left in the limber chest. Statham did move his gun once more before the battle ended, taking it near a small log stable, behind which the horses were led for protection. By this time the artillerymen were falling fast. The sergeant was shot

<sup>12</sup> Kester, *Rich Mountain*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *Confederate Military History*, III, 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Official Records*, II, 270-271.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-274.

through the body and both legs, another man had an arm splintered, another was killed instantly by a ball in the head. Toward the end of the fight Captain DeLagnel, who had already had his horse shot from under him, ran to the gun to help Lieutenant Statham and his few remaining men in serving it. He helped fire only three or four rounds when he was struck in the side and hand.<sup>16</sup> It was at this time that Rosecrans, seeing signs of yielding on the part of the Confederates, ordered the final charge in which almost the entire Union force participated.<sup>17</sup> The Southern force was outflanked on both sides and DeLagnel, although almost unconscious from his wounds, ordered his men to retreat by an old road to the northwest, which led down the mountain to Beverly. Lieutenant Statham was wounded just as the retreat began and was captured along with several others.<sup>18</sup> DeLagnel managed to escape from the field and reached the house of a mountaineer, where he was cared for until his recovery.<sup>19</sup> In the middle of August, he was well enough to try to reach the Confederate lines near Monterey. At one of the picket posts of the 3rd Ohio, he was stopped as he tried to pass in the guise of a farm hand. He might have succeeded if he had not been carrying cavalry boots, which aroused the soldiers' suspicions. He was taken to see the captain in charge, to whom he confessed his identity and was made a prisoner of war. Within a short time he was talking to a former comrade-in-arms of the U. S. Army, General J. J. Reynolds, a West Point classmate.<sup>20</sup>

The battle at Hart's House had lasted from 2 or 3 p. m. to about 6 p. m. with DeLagnel's 310 men holding off Rosecrans' 1,917 for three or four hours. The Union forces lost 12 killed and 40 wounded, while the Confederates had about one-third of their troops killed, wounded or captured.<sup>21</sup>

Down in Camp Garnett, Pegram had been suffering the torture of indecision. He feared both a flank and a frontal attack. Some slight firing had taken place at the camp, when Major Keifer of the 3rd Ohio had ridden toward it with a small force. The Federals had been turned back by the fire of one cannon.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>19</sup> *Evans, Confederate Military History*, IV, 835.

<sup>20</sup> *Beatty, Memoirs*, 40-42.

<sup>21</sup> *Evans, Confederate Military History*, III, 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Keifer, Rock Mountain*, 12.

When the firing at Hart's House began, Pegram prepared a relief column to go to DeLagnel's aid. Six companies of infantry and another of his four guns were started up the mountain, Pegram with them. On the way the runaway caisson of DeLagnel's force came down the road, striking and overturning the gun on the way up. Before the infantry reached Hart's House, it was discovered that the troops there had been forced to retreat. At this point Pegram, after hasty consultation with his officers, decided it would be suicide to attack the Union force and ordered Major Tyler to lead the five companies of the 20th Virginia and the one of the 25th Virginia either to join General Garnett at Laurel Hill, or to join Colonel William Scott with his 44th Virginia, near Beverly. It was about 6:30 p. m. when this decision was reached, and Pegram turned about to go back down to Camp Garnett. He kept to the woods for fear the Federal troops were on the road. As a result he soon lost his way and did not reach camp, about two miles away by the road, until nearly midnight. He had been injured by a fall from his horse while going down and was exhausted from the day's activity.<sup>23</sup>

While the action on Rich Mountain was taking place, McClellan had drawn up his remaining troops, ready to assault Camp Garnett, when Rosecrans delivered his attack. Between 2 and 3 p. m. shots were heard in the rear of the fortifications, then volleys of musketry and artillery. The Union troops immediately prepared to attack. General McClellan and his staff galloped up and the troops watched expectantly. He halted a short distance from Colonel Beatty of the 3rd Ohio and sat on his horse listening to the sound of battle. Beatty said indecision was "stamped on every line of his countenance,"<sup>24</sup> while the battle seemed to grow fiercer in the enemy's rear. The firing finally did die out without any order to advance given and the soldiers became disheartened with the belief that Rosecrans' force had been destroyed. This belief lasted through the night.<sup>25</sup>

Back in Camp Garnett about 11 p. m., Colonel Heck, not having heard anything from Pegram, called together the other

<sup>23</sup> Evans, *Confederate Military History*, IV, 535.

<sup>24</sup> Beatty, *Memoirs*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

officers. After a hurried council of war, it was decided to hold their position. When Pegram arrived at midnight he ordered Heck to take command and withdraw under the guidance of Jed Hotchkiss over the mountain to Beverly. Pegram felt himself too exhausted to make the trip. The march was taken up about 1 a. m. with Captain R. D. Lilley's company from Augusta County in the advance. The troops first filed northward from the extreme right of the works, then northeastward, and finally eastward across the mountain. The night was a very bad one. Rain poured down in torrents and the forest through which the troops passed was in places swampy, in others rocky, and everywhere the trip was obstructed by fallen trees and dense thickets. At one point, shortly after leaving camp, a low whistle was heard on the right. Most of the line halted while Hotchkiss replied with another whistle, and then gave the order to press on. Hotchkiss learned later from a prisoner that he had passed a Union regiment which might have fired upon him if he had not replied to the whistle. About daylight the crest of the mountain was reached and it was discovered that only about 70 or 80 men had followed them. The rest of the column had started out after Hotchkiss in single file, but after they had begun to move Pegram decided he would try to go with them. Word was started to halt the column until he could reach the front, but it got only as far as the rear of Lilley's company, where the contact was broken. Thus most of Pegram's men were scattered out along the western slope of Rich Mountain, while Hotchkiss and a small part of it were on the crest. After a short conference, the Hotchkiss party decided to continue. They went down the old Merritt Road along which part of DeLagnel's force and Nat Tyler's troops had retreated, and reached Beverly about 11 a. m. After resting, Hotchkiss' men collected some of the supplies stored in Beverly and continued their retreat to Huttonsville, which they reached about 3 p. m.<sup>26</sup>

On the morning of July 12, Rosecrans advanced down the road toward Camp Garnett, which he reached about 6 a. m. The camp was abandoned except for several sick and wounded soldiers. McClellan was notified, and his troops advanced to the fortifications. Ten officers and 59 enlisted men were taken prisoner there, beside 21 captured by Rosecrans at Hart's

<sup>26</sup> Official Records, II, 261-263.



House. All four of Pegram's guns were captured.<sup>27</sup> The Union troops advanced across Rich Mountain to Beverly, which they reached late in the day of the 12th.

There was another aspect to the Rich Mountain affair which must be mentioned. The 44th Virginia was to a certain extent involved in the action. That regiment, under Colonel William Scott, had left Staunton on July 4 and had marched over the mountains toward Beverly. As they advanced messengers kept arriving from General Garnett urging Scott to hasten his march to Laurel Hill.<sup>28</sup> On the night of July 10 the 44th reached Beverly, where it spent the night. Scott reported by courier to Garnett and was ordered to remain in camp that night and to proceed cautiously to Laurel Hill the following morning.<sup>29</sup> Early the next morning the regiment started, urged on by still another messenger from the general. The messenger then went south to meet Colonel Edward Johnson and his regiment and the 44th hastened north. An advance guard of some 14 men was sent out. This was the first such military experience for any of the men in the regiment.<sup>30</sup> No more than three or four miles had been covered, however, when a courier from Colonel Pegram overtook Scott. He brought word that Pegram thought the enemy was working his way around the right flank of Camp Garnett. Therefore, Pegram asked Scott to put his regiment in a position about one and a half miles west of Beverly on the Staunton-Parkersburg Pike, where a road entered from the north. Pegram also asked that Scott take with him two pieces of artillery stationed at Leadsville Church. Finally, Pegram told Scott that he would inform General Garnett so that he would not expect the 44th at Laurel Hill.<sup>31</sup>

Scott at once sent Captain Shelton with a sergeant to Leadsville Church for the guns and for a troop of cavalry stationed there. He then distributed extra cartridges to his men, counter-marched to Beverly, moved out toward Rich Mountain, and took the position suggested to him by Pegram. While there, Captain Shelton returned with the news that the two artillery

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 216.

<sup>28</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, July 30, 1861, Vol. LVIII, No. 22. Report from several officers of the 44th Virginia concerning the operations of that regiment before, during, and after the battle of Rich Mountain.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Mellwaine, *Memoirs of Three Score Years and Ten* (New York: 1908), 127.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Official Records*, II, 218.

pieces had already been taken to Laurel Hill and the commander of the cavalry troop refused to come on the grounds that the order had not been delivered in writing.

Shortly thereafter a message arrived from Garnett which gave approval to Pegram's request and ordered Scott to defend himself to the last if he should be attacked. He was also ordered to inform Garnett of any enemy movement of which he had exact information.<sup>32</sup>

Just before he received these orders from Garnett, Scott heard scattered firing on the mountain, which soon grew in intensity. Scott assumed that it was at Pegram's camp and was either a frontal attack or a feint to cover the movement around to right, about which Pegram had warned him.<sup>33</sup> He grew impatient when he neither saw anything of the enemy nor had word from Pegram, so he sent a civilian volunteer, John Hughes, to try to reach Colonel Pegram and find out what he wanted Scott to do. Hughes dashed up the road but never returned. Presently Lieutenant A. Cochrane of the Churchville Cavalry came down the road with a few men and told Scott of the flanking movement by Rosecrans, and the fighting at Hart's House. He also said that Scott was wanted at the fight, so he ordered the 44th forward with Lieutenant Cochrane and his men as guides.<sup>34</sup>

Just before reaching the summit, the firing ceased and cheers and shouts were heard. Scott halted his troops and after a brief reconnaissance with Cochrane it was decided to retire to Beverly.<sup>35</sup> At Beverly, Scott gathered many of the stores and retired toward Huttonsville, convoying a wagon train over a mile in length. While on the way an order was received from General Garnett to the effect that Scott was to retire beyond Huttonsville and try to prevent McClellan's further advance.<sup>36</sup> At Huttonsville, Scott was joined by Major Tyler with his companies of the 20th and 25th Virginia regiments and together they continued their retreat.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-277.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

The battle of Rich Mountain was decisive in McClellan's campaign in northwestern Virginia. Not only did the Union troops hold the upper Tygart River Valley, offering a threat to the Shenandoah region, but General Garnett was forced to retreat on a roundabout route to the northeast. His little force in western Virginia had been split asunder. The troops under his personal command were badly mauled on their retreat and became completely demoralized, while Garnett himself was killed. Pegram and the troops with him wandered blindly across Rich Mountain. Except for a small number who escaped on their own initiative this force surrendered to McClellan on July 12. The remainder of the Confederate troops, which had retreated to the south was unable even with reinforcements to offer much of a threat for a lengthy period of time. That McClellan did not continue his advance eastward to Staunton, or south to the Kanawha, was due mainly to the fact that he was shortly called to Washington to assume command of the army in the east. Certainly, the Confederates could have offered but feeble opposition to either of such moves had they been made in strength.

In any event, McClellan's campaign won northwestern Virginia for the North, helped make possible the formation of the new state of West Virginia, and gained fame and higher command for the general himself. Rich Mountain had been the key battle in that campaign.